

Seaford to Exceat last checked	Exceat to Birling Gap last checked	Birling Gap to Eastbourne last checked	Birling Gap to East Dean last checked
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Seaford to Eastbourne

The Seven Sisters and Beachy Head

Length:	Main walk	21.9km (13.6 miles)
	Seaford to Exceat	6.2km (3.9 miles)
	Seaford to Birling Gap	12.7km (7.9 miles)
	Seaford to East Dean	15km (9.3 miles)
	Exceat to Beachy Head	10.4km (6.4 miles)
	Exceat to Eastbourne	15.7km (9.7 miles)

Toughness: 9 out of 10

Maps: OS Explorer Map: OL25 (formerly 123);
OS Landranger Map: 199 (a small bit of the start on 198)

Features

This classic clifftop walk – one of the finest coastal walks in England – affords stunning (and very famous) views of the white cliffs of the Seven Sisters and the renowned Beachy Head, before ending in the elegant seafront town of Eastbourne. There is quite a lot of climbing and descending on the walk - indeed, apart from the section around Cuckmere Haven and the finish along the Eastbourne seafront, almost none of it is flat – but somehow in the grandeur of the scenery the effort is not noticed.

In summer, the walk also offers numerous opportunities for a dip in the sea: see **Sea Swimming** on page 3 for more details.

Walk options

This walk is well served by Brighton city buses, which enable you to start or stop the walk at various points. The **number 12, 12a or 12x bus** runs from Seaford via Exceat and East Dean to Eastbourne, with as many as six buses an hour Mondays to Saturdays, and three to four times an hour on Sundays. On all days of the week the service is half-hourly from about 8pm to 11pm.

There is also a **13X**, which operates the same route, but also taking in **Birling Gap** and **Beachy Head**. It runs three times a day on Sundays year round, while in the summer months it is hourly at the weekend and three times a day on weekdays.

For more information and live departures on either bus, see www.buses.co.uk. To catch either bus in Seaford, turn right out of the station and stay on the main road: the stop is 200 metres along on the left. In Eastbourne the bus stops just off the main shopping street near the railway station.

Using these buses, you could do the following shorter versions of the walk:

a) Seaford to Exceat: A **6.2km (3.9 mile)** walk with beautiful views of the Seven Sisters, which can be combined with a swim and a picnic at Cuckmere Haven.

b) Seaford to Birling Gap: A **12.7km (7.9 mile)** walk over the Seven Sisters, with lunch at Exceat and tea at Birling Gap: You can finish here when the 13X bus is operating, or see option **c)** below.

c) Seaford to East Dean: In paragraph 40 on page 7 a 2.3km (1.4 mile) walk inland from Birling Gap to East Dean is provided which gives you access to the very regular number 12/12a/12x bus service to Eastbourne or Seaford. Adding this to option **b)** above makes a total walk of **15km (9.3 miles)**.

d) Exceat to Beachy Head: A **10.4km (6.4 mile)** walk along the finest stretch of the cliffs: only possible when the 13X is operating: otherwise, you have to do option **e)** below.

e) Exceat to Eastbourne: A **15.7km (9.7 mile)** walk over the Seven Sisters and Beachy Head, with refreshment stops at Birling Gap and Beachy Head.

It is also interesting to **do this walk backwards**: you get a steep climb out of Eastbourne to start, can have lunch at Beachy Head or Birling Gap, and then tea at the Cafe Just Around the Corner at the end of the Seven Sisters. The **Eastbourne to East Dean** walk on this website has directions for the first half of this walk.

Trains

Two trains an hour (one an hour on Sunday) go from **London Victoria** to Seaford, changing at **Lewes** (journey time 1 hour 25 minutes). Take **the train nearest to 9.15** from Victoria to get to lunch at Exceat in time.

Returning from Eastbourne there are two direct trains hourly (one an hour on Sundays) back from Eastbourne to Victoria (journey time: 1 hour 30 minutes).

Lunch and Tea

The Cuckmere Inn (01323 892247). Situated by Exceat bridge 6.2km (3.9 miles) into the walk, this pub is very popular but efficient at serving food from its wide menu. It does meals all afternoon and evening and has plenty of outside tables.

Cafe Just Around the Corner (formerly the Saltmarsh Cafe). 400 metres down the road from the Cuckmere Inn, this tea room has a charming open-air courtyard and serves a varied home-made hot lunch menu, as well as sandwiches, ploughman's lunches and teas. It is open daily till 5pm in summer, Thursdays to Sundays till 4pm in winter. Nearby, next to the Seven Sisters Visitor Centre, is the **Grab and Go** cafe, open till 4pm daily and serving hot drinks, sandwiches and light lunches.

National Trust Café, Birling Gap This self-service café, 12.7km (7.9 miles) into the walk, has a wonderful location on the cliffs above Birling Gap and is an ideal tea stop. It is open daily until 4pm in winter, 5pm in summer.

Beachy Head (01323 728060). This large and efficient pub is located right on the top of Beachy Head, 16.6km (10.3 miles) into the walk. As well as serving meals (the same menu as at the Cuckmere Inn) all afternoon and evening, it also offers tea and coffee, making it a possible tea stop. In summer if you're stopping for dinner, note that it is 2km (1.2 miles) from this pub to the edge of Eastbourne, and another 3.4km (2.1 miles) from there to the station.

Qualisea Fish Restaurant There are several places to have fish and chips in Terminus Road, the road leading away from the seafront in Eastbourne, but this one, 200 metres up the street on the right, is the traditional favourite. It has the usual takeway, but also a large restaurant. It is open till 8pm year round, sometimes later in summer.

Sea swimming

From mid June to September there are excellent opportunities for sea swimming on this walk, though as always you do so at your own risk. All the beaches are shingle, except for some parts of Eastbourne beach which can be sandy at low tide.

Seaford has a relatively gently shelving beach that is swimmable at all states of the tide and sometimes has a lifeguard, but note that you get out of your depth very quickly. When large waves are slapping onto the shingle, this beach can be dangerous.

A more scenic (and often more sheltered) spot for a dip is **Cuckmere Haven**, one of the few places on the South Coast where it really feels like you are wild swimming, with the white cliffs of the Seven Sisters making a wonderful backdrop. The only thing to watch out for is the current from the Cuckmere River, where it joins the sea. Traditionally this has flowed straight out from the river mouth, but some years storms or currents create a shingle bar which diverts it to the left or right. So have a good look to see what the latest position is. For three hours either side of low tide the sea retreats across a large area of rock and seaweed and it is very tricky to wade out far enough to get sufficient depth, at least on the west side of the beach; on the east side there is a sandy area that comes relatively close to the shore at one point, making wading out at low tide easier.

Birling Gap is also a very scenic spot for a swim and is a popular beach in summer. Again the best time for swimming is two or three hours either side of high tide: outside this period the sea retreats across jagged rocks (the remains of eroded cliffs). The most awkward time is when these rocks are covered by shallow water: however, at very low tide you can sometimes pick your way through the rocks to the sea beyond, the area immediately opposite the steps being particularly rock-free. As at Seaford, larger waves can slap quite sharply down onto the shingle here, making getting in and out of the sea awkward or even dangerous.

Eastbourne has a long beach and a seasonal lifeguard service on the section between the Wish Tower (the round Martello Tower) and the pier. This is a classic South Coast beach, with the sea coming up the shingle bar at high tide but retreating across sandy mud at low tide. South of the Wish Tower low tide reveals an area of rock pools, making swimming tricky here at such times, but the main beach between the Wish Tower and pier can be swum at any state of the tide.

WALK DIRECTIONS

Special note: *Take care near the cliff edges on this walk, as they are crumbly and liable to collapse: the official advice is to keep 5 metres from any cliff edge. People taking selfies regularly ignore this advice: don't imitate them.*

Seaford to the Cuckmere Inn and Exceat (6.2km/3.9 miles)

1. Leaving Seaford Station turn right. In 40 metres turn right down Church Street, heading towards the church, ignoring a road (Dane Road) to the right.
2. In another 80 metres you pass the church on your left. In a further 100 metres, as the road curves to the left, continue straight on (still on Church Street).

3. In 60 metres, at a T-junction, turn left and in 10 metres turn right along The Causeway.
4. In 150 metres you come to the seafront, where you cross the road and turn left along the seafront promenade towards the chalk cliffs.
5. In 350 metres you pass the **Martello Tower**.

The **Martello Tower** in Seaford is the most westerly of a chain of 103 such fortresses built to protect the South East coast of England against invasion in the early part of the Napoleonic Wars. The other end of the chain is in Aldeburgh in Suffolk.

6. In a further 400 metres, at the start of the cliffs, and just before the harbour wall, veer left up a curving gravel path that climbs a grassy slope.
7. In 100 metres veer right off this path onto the grassy slope. You are now on the cliff top path, climbing uphill.
8. Follow the cliff top path for 3km to Cuckmere Haven. Initially there is a golf course to your left. In 500 metres you come to the top of the hill and 400 metres later you pass a radar beacon (a navigational aid for commercial aircraft) to your left. The golf course ends soon after. The white cliffs of the Seven Sisters are now visible in the distance.

The **Seven Sisters** is the name for the undulating cliffs between Cuckmere Haven and Birling Gap. They are thought to have been formed by glacier meltwater at the end of the last Ice Age: the meltwater carved steep sided valleys, which were then truncated by sea erosion into the cliffs we see today.

The original Seven Sisters are the Pleiades, a group of seven stars which Greek mythology portrayed as sisters. There are in fact now only six Pleiades, one having exploded in antiquity, and from this angle there seem to be only six humps on the Seven Sisters too (the rise on which Belle Tout lighthouse stands, beyond the brown smudge of Birling Gap does not count, as this is not part of the Seven Sisters).

But there are in fact seven: one is hidden from view. Or are there eight? Careful attention to the walk text will reveal that between Cuckmere Haven and Birling Gap, you pass over eight hills in all – Haven Brow, Short Brow, Rough Brow, Brass Point, Flagstaff Point, Flat Hill, Baily's Hill and Went Hill. So which one is not a real sister?

9. 1.4km later, after a long steady descent, the latter part of in a shallow valley with fine views of the Seven Sisters ahead, you reach **Hope Gap**, where some steps lead down to the sea.

10. Ignore the steps and instead bear slightly left here, following the cliff top path up a steep slope. The path soon levels out and in 500 metres, you come to a row of cottages.
11. *The track downhill past the cottages no longer reaches the sea due to erosion, so carry on past it on the edge of a grassy space, with scrub to your right in 30 metres.*
12. In 120 metres more you come down onto the shingle beach of **Cuckmere Haven**.

*The sea is making a determined effort to break through the beach to the marsh here. If it succeeds and the river path becomes inaccessible, an alternative route is to turn **sharp left** just before the beach, which takes you onto a path along the valley edge, which leads all the way to the Cuckmere Inn (paragraph 15 below).*

13. Otherwise continue straight across the shingle, passing a small lagoon on your left, until you come to the bank of the **Cuckmere River** in 100 metres.

Though the onward route lies over the cliffs ahead, you now have to make a **4.2km (2.6 mile) detour inland** to cross the river (and get to lunch at Exceat).

*Note that tempting though it looks just to wade the river, the Cuckmere River is deeper than it looks and surprisingly fast flowing even when it fans out across the beach at low tide. Trying to cross it is **NOT** recommended.*

14. To continue the walk, turn left along the river. In 1.2km, 350 metres before the road bridge, the bank makes a sharp turn left along a line of shrubs. 80 metres later, at a crosspaths, go right to follow a path between two barbed wire fences.
15. In 250 metres pass through a wooden gate to enter the car park of the **Cuckmere Inn**. Carry on through the car park for 80 metres to reach the main road. The entrance to the pub is on the left.

Exceat to Birling Gap **(6.5km/4 miles)**

16. To continue the walk cross the busy A259 with care, and turn right to follow the pedestrian path across **Exceat Bridge**. At the other side of the bridge, re-cross the road. **You now have a choice:**

- **If you are not planning to stop at the Cafe Just Around the Corner** or the **Grab & Go** cafe, go through a kissing gate just to the right of the bus stop to emerge onto the bank of the Cuckmere River. Carry on along this, with the river to your right. In 800 metres pass through a kissing gate and in another 100 metres, just after a body of water ends on your left, turn left onto a chalk path between two lagoons. In 25 metres cross a stile to the right of a gate and in 40 metres more turn right on a gravel track. In another 40 metres, at a junction marked by a footpath post, fork left following the South Downs Way. Continue the directions in paragraph 17 opposite.
- Alternatively **to stop at the Cafe Just Around the Corner** or **Grab and Go** cafe, carry on along the road. In 400 metres, where the main road curves right, ignore a minor road to the left, but cross the A259 again with care and go straight up a tarmac drive. In 50 metres, when level with the car park, the **Cafe Just Around the Corner** entrance is just ahead of you. Otherwise, turn right (so left and left again if coming out of the cafe) to walk down a tarmac drive between houses. In 50 metres there is a courtyard on your right, which contains the **Seven Sisters Visitor Centre**, a **water fountain** where you can refill your bottles, and the **Grab and Go** cafe.

Otherwise, 20 metres beyond the courtyard turn left along the fence alongside the main road, to reach a crossing point over the main road in another 30 metres. Cross the road with care and go straight ahead through a gate to

the left of a wooden fieldgate with a cattle grid. Carry on along a concrete track (or the grassy path running parallel to it on the right-hand side).

In 1.2km, just after passing around a spur of a hill to your left, you come to a three-armed footpath signpost. Ignore multiple gateways immediately on your left to carry straight on through a wooden gate to the left of a fieldgate on a stony track.

70 metres further, at another footpath sign, take the left fork, signposted South Downs Way. Continue with the directions in the next paragraph.

17. You now stay on the **South Downs Way** all the way to the outskirts of Eastbourne. In 70 metres pass through a wooden gate and up steps. Carry on uphill, with a wire fence to your right following the fence, as it curves gently right uphill.
18. In 750 metres pass through a gate and carry straight on.
19. 250 metres later you come to the summit of **Haven Brow**, the first (and highest) of the **Seven Sisters**, which is marked with a two-armed signpost. Bear left along the clifftop, following the South Downs Way signpost.
20. You now pass into three dips and up over three summits, in order **Short Bottom, Short Brow, Limekiln Bottom, Rough Brow, Rough Bottom** and **Brass Point**. After the last of these you have a long 400 metre descent (the lateral distance, not the amount of vertical descent) to **Gap Bottom** before rising for 150 metres to reach the peak of **Flagstaff Point**, which is marked by a low Sarsen stone monument.
21. Beyond this keep straight on along the clifftop path for 2km to Birling Gap, whose buildings are visible ahead. You pass over three more humps – one minor one – **Flat Hill** - and two major ones – **Baily's Hill** and **Went Hill**.
22. 170 metres after the summit of Went Hill **you pass through a**

wooden kissing gate onto a path through scrub. In 120 metres you come to a T-junction with a stony path, where you turn right. In 25 metres follow the path round to the left past a wooden fieldgate onto what is now a gravel track.

23. Carry on down this track and in 250 metres, 30 metres before you come to a road, turn right at steps leading down to a toilet block, and across the car park to the cliff top of **Birling Gap**, where you will find the **National Trust tea room** and visitor centre, the recommended tea stop. Here are also steps down the cliff to the beach.

To walk to East Dean from here (option c in Walk Options on page 2), refer to the instructions in paragraph 40 on page 7.

Belle Tout first entered service in 1828, over 130 years after the need for a lighthouse on this spot was first suggested. It had 30 oil lamps, requiring two gallons of oil per hour. A problem with its location soon became apparent, however – when the weather was bad, the clifftop tended to be shrouded in mist so the light could not be seen. The cliff also blocked the view of the light from ships sailing too close to the shore.

As a result, a new lighthouse was built – the one that still stands at the base of Beachy Head to this day. It opened in 1902 and Belle Tout went out of commission. It was a tea room for a while, was used as target practice by Canadian artillery during World War II, and was later restored by the local council.

By the 1990s Belle Tout was a private house and in danger of falling into the sea due to cliff erosion, and so in March 1999 in a feat of engineering that captured national media attention, it was moved back 17 metres away from the cliff using hydraulic jacks. It was then bought by a preservation trust and in March 2010 started a new life as a luxury bed and breakfast, with the lantern room turned into a lounge with 360 degree views.

Birling Gap to Beachy Head (3.8km/2.4 miles)

24. After tea, from the clifftop at Birling Gap face inland and go half-right across the car park aiming for the landward end of the coastguard cottages to rejoin the clifftop path.
25. Follow this path uphill. At the start of the climb look back for fine views of the Seven Sisters. In 1km you come to **Belle Tout Lighthouse**. Pass through this if the gates are open, or otherwise to the left of it on a broad grassy path, and beyond it carry on, parallel to the cliff edge down into a large dip.
26. In 350 metres, at the bottom of the dip, ignore the road to your left and carry straight on up the next rise in the cliff path.
27. You now climb solidly for 2.8km (1.7 miles) to **Beachy Head**, the one exception being a sharp and unexpected dip after about 1km. You know you have reached Beachy Head proper when you come to an eight-sided memorial to armed forces personnel involved in the Second World War defences which were sited here. 200 metres away ahead left is the **Beachy Head** pub, a possible tea or dinner stop.

Beachy Head to Eastbourne station (5.4km/3.3 miles)

28. Carrying on past the memorial, in 100 metres slant right onto the signposted England Coast Path, which skirts down and around a bowl in the cliffs
29. In 200 metres this crosses a tarmac path leading to a viewpoint right, with a memorial to Second World War II airmen. In 15 metres it crosses the tarmac path again and carries on slightly downhill on a gravel path which runs just below the tarmac path initially.
- **If coming out of the pub**, cross the road and walk over the grassy hill ahead to come down to a tarmac path leading to a viewpoint right, with a memorial to Second World War airmen. 40 metres before the viewpoint, turn

left on a gravel path that cuts off a loop in the tarmac path, and then continue on along, slightly downhill on a gravel path which runs just below the tarmac path initially.

- 30.** Stay on this path, keeping just below the lip of the ridge to your left, and ignoring all ways off.
- *This path sometimes gets a bit overgrown. If it does, there are regular escape paths up to the left, which bring you out onto the ridge top on a broad grassy strip by the road. Turn right along this. 500 metres from the pub it opens out into a grassy hillside with a view of Eastbourne ahead. In another 100 metres veer right away from the road, slanting downhill towards a footpath signpost at the end of a hedge 200 metres away. When you get to the sign, which says Seafront, veer right onto a wide grass and earth path along the edge of a valley. Continue with paragraph 33 below.*
- 31.** In 700 metres, at a fork in the path, take the leftmost path, marked by a yellow arrow on a post, which climbs up onto the ridge and comes out into a grassy space in 70 metres. Cross this and follow a path through scrub beyond, as indicated by an arrow on a post, curving round the top of a valley.
- 32.** In 250 metres you again come out into a grassy space. Here veer right, following a sign to Seafront, onto a wide grass and earth path going along the valley edge.
- 33.** This path descends gradually at first between bushes and small trees, and then steeply down across open hillside, all the way to the edge of **Eastbourne**. In 1km you descend to a road, with a refreshment kiosk on your right.
- 34.** Keep straight on along the right-hand side of the road. In 120 metres you cross the driveway to St Bede's Preparatory School and in 90 metres more the entrance to Helen Gardens. In a further 80 metres turn right onto a tarmac driveway, signposted: "Holywell Promenade (Western Pde)".

- 35.** Continue downhill, ignoring turnings off and in 300 metres merge with the seafront promenade. Follow this all the way to Eastbourne Pier, a distance of 2km.
- 36.** 150 metres before the pier slant left up a ramp to reach a pedestrian crossing across the seafront road.
- 37.** Cross the road here, and turn right, then immediately left, down Terminus Road.
- 38.** In 200 metres, at a crossroads (with the **Qualisea**, a recommended fish and chip restaurant on your right), go straight on up Eastbourne's pedestrian shopping street (still Terminus Place), crossing Pevensey Road and curving left with the road in 100 metres.
- 39.** Ignoring ways off and keeping to the main shopping street, in 500 metres more you come to **Eastbourne Station** on your right.

Birling Gap to East Dean **(2.3km/1.4 miles)**

- 40.** From the cafe, walk inland through the car park and past the toilet block, and turn left on the car wide gravel track beyond it, which leads uphill past some houses.
- 41.** In 300 metres the track goes through a gate (usually open) and turns right. In 25 metres more ignore the South Downs Way signposted to the left and keep straight on.
- 42.** In 70 metres or so pass through a gate into an open field and keep uphill across this, with fine views of the sea behind and to the left.
- 43.** In 200 metres pass through another gate and keep uphill on a faint grassy track.
- 44.** In 600 metres, near the top of the hill, you pass a barn with a red metal roof. Here **veer right off the track to converge with the line of scrub** (which has a brief gap shortly afterwards, but then resumes).
- 45.** 300 metres or so beyond the barn, **look out for a footpath post to the right**, which indicates the start

of a path slanting through the scrub and down the escarpment.

46. Carry on down this path, passing through a gate in 150 metres and in 120 metres gateposts (gate missing). You are now in an open field. Keep on down its right-hand edge, passing to the left of a house and through a fieldgate, to come to a tarmac lane in 100 metres
47. Follow this tarmac lane into the centre of East Dean (a village green). Turn right across the green towards the **Tiger Inn** pub.
48. Just in front of the Tiger Inn turn right down a brick-paved driveway. Immediately to your right here is another tea stop – the **Hikers Rest**.
49. Carry on down the brick-paved driveway to the road and turn left on it.
50. *Ignore the bus stop towards the end of this road which is for the 13X bus.* For all other buses, carry on to the main road: the stop for **Eastbourne** is **across** the main road, on the **right**. The stop for **Seaford** is to the **left** on this side of the road.

The bus journey takes about 15 minutes and there is now a stop right by Eastbourne station. To go to the **seafont** or the **Qualisea** fish and chip shop, stay on the bus for one more stop, to its end point in Cornfield Road. Getting off the bus here, walk back up the road and turn right into the pedestrian main shopping street of Eastbourne. In 150 metres ignore a road to the right, but in another 100 metres fork right down a pedestrian street. This crosses two roads (Qualisea is on the left after the second, in 200 metres), and in another 200 metres you come to the seafont.